

SOCIO-SPATIAL FRAGMENTATION, EUROPEAN IMMIGRATION AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN THE PROVINCE OF ALICANTE (SPAIN)

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The heavy construction activity preceding the beginning of the great 2007-2008 financial crisis transformed the urban and social structure of hundreds of municipalities located in the Spanish Mediterranean coast, particularly in the province of Alicante (the southern most third of the region of Valencia, in southeastern Spain). In this area, demand from touristic and residential flows and from Northern European migrants (mostly coming from countries with a per capita income higher than Spain's) adjusted to the real estate offer generated by the mass production of houses, initially conceived as second homes, built on the outskirts of traditional urban centers (Membrado, 2013, 2014). The socio-spatial fragmentation experienced by many towns along the Spanish Mediterranean provinces because of new developments around their periphery accelerated from the 1990 decade and spread to pre-coastal, and even inland, municipalities. In any case, by *socio-spatial fragmentation* we generically refer to the interruption of continuity between traditional villages and new urban developments, leaving empty spaces in between (Muñiz *et al.*, 2006).

Previous studies have explained the basic features of the dynamics involved in the production of these new urban structures. The effects of these trends have been especially significant in Alicante, the Spanish province in which studies have most clearly identified localities where the gap between Northern European citizens and the rest of their residents is wide enough to reveal the existence of two different social orders (Huete and Mantecón, 2011,

2012; Mantecón *et al.*, 2009). In this regard, such previous studies document the existence of a spatial fragmentation process which is linked to a process of *social* fragmentation. The latter is articulated by at least three intertwined trends: a) first, a dualization concerning the socio-economic role of space, which tends to specialize either in leisure functions or in work-related functions; b) second, a socio-demographic differentiation resulting in the over-representation of certain age groups in each of the two types of space considered; and c) third, an unequal distribution of people of certain nationalities, which can be empirically observed in the massive presence of British and German citizens, aged mostly over 55, in housing developments built in the outskirts of localities.

Once the province of Alicante had been identified as the Spanish region where the aforementioned fragmentation processes are most intense (Huete and Mantecón, 2011; Martí and Nolasco, 2012), Alicante municipalities where the foreign-born population, as recorded by the Spanish Census, represented more than 25% of the total population were selected for this study: 25 municipalities were found in that province with such demographic characteristics. These 25 municipalities were then classified into two groups: those where more than half the total population is foreign-born and those where the foreign-born population accounts for between 25 and 50% of the total. Finally, the 25 selected municipalities were classified again, this time according to their location: coastal (less than 3 miles from the shoreline), pre-coastal (between 3 and 6 miles from the shoreline) or inland (more than 6 miles from the shoreline).

The aim of this study is to analyze the discourse that politicians with direct responsibility in local councils produce in order to explain the particular territorial configuration of these 25 towns, marked by socio-spatial fragmentation. Studying the discourse of local politicians is particularly relevant, since it was, together with that of housing developers, the main source of arguments purporting to legitimate urban sprawl –which was commonly presented under the euphemistic label of «residential tourism»– in the province of Alicante during the years preceding the collapse of the housing bubble (Mantecón, 2008a,b). Thus, local politicians became a key social actor in the socio-spatial fragmentation process when they decided to specialize in attracting private investment and managing the physical and human resources in their municipalities, seemingly, according to criteria of business efficiency. Draped in the ideological mantle of competitiveness, and wielding tourism development as an excuse to justify the expansion of the real estate economy (Mantecón, 2010), local politicians used their growing power in the field of urban planning to turn the land into a heap of business opportunities. In turn, as Fernando Vera (2005) explains, taxes coming from housing development became the most substantial revenue source for local finances.

Moreover, the current context of economic crisis –obviously linked to the collapse of the construction industry– adds interest to the results of this paper. In this sense, it is particularly interesting to note how local politicians interpret the interrelations between the socio-spatial fragmentation processes started during the expansive period and the effects of the economic crisis. It must be stressed that local authorities, who played a significant role in the expansion of the housing bubble, are now most affected by the consequences of its collapse.

The analysis of local authorities' discourse was done using a qualitative methodological approach, based on in-depth interviews with a mayor or a local councilor belonging to the ruling party in each of the 25 selected municipalities. From the experience of previous

qualitative studies (Mantecón, 2008a), one interview with one local authority from each of the 25 localities was considered to be enough to grasp the discourse representing the ideological principles of the ruling party. It was also assumed that a larger number of interviews with members of the same party in the same municipality would offer essentially redundant information. The interviews lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes and were performed with the aid of a script which contained open questions concerning the assessment of socio-cultural and economic aspects linked to the presence in their municipality of European foreign residents coming from countries with a GDP per capita higher than Spain's. The field work was conducted between July and October, 2012. 19 councilors, 2 deputy mayors and 4 mayors were interviewed. As for their political affiliation, it was representative of the distribution of local power in the province of Alicante at the time: 16 respondents belonged to the Partido Popular ('Popular Party') (Spain's main right-wing party), 7 to the Partido Socialista Obrero Español ('Spanish Socialist Workers' Party', actually Spain's main Social Democratic party) and 2 to the Bloc-Compromís coalition (a Valencian nationalist left-wing party).

The analysis is organized into five sections, in which the perception of politicians regarding the socio-spatial fragmentation of their municipalities is studied within the framework of a wider assessment of the effects of the migratory-residential process which is associated with this socio-spatial fragmentation. In this way, this paper aims at a more comprehensive approach. Specifically, the five sections of the study are: 1) an overview of the interviewees' perception of the interaction process between local and foreign residents; 2) their attitudes regarding the arrival of foreign residents; 3) their perception of factors that have marked the coexistence between local and foreign residents; 4) their assessment of the process of socio-spatial fragmentation and the subsequent integration processes; and 5) a discussion of the impact of the economic crisis.

Through the presentation and discussion of the main findings, one can observe how respondents begin to accept some criticisms, but, at the same time, they shun any political responsibility and, of course, omit any recognition to those who warned of the risks of specializing local development by blowing up a deficiently planned housing-based economy, disguised as tourist-residential development. Those criticisms that politicians are willing to accept are associated with the foreign residents' demands and the housing developers' negligence.

With regard to the foreign residents' demands, the interviewees now appear to have an ambivalent attitude: on one hand, local politicians express gratitude to foreign residents for helping improve the local economy (in the early stages of the latter's settlement in a given locality, they invested in it and did not demand much in return); on the other hand, those very authorities begin to show signs of impatience with the growing demands of foreign residents and with their stubborn reluctance to adapt to the rhythms of local life and, beyond that, to the way Spaniards see the world.

Regarding housing developers, local politicians now have a discourse of recrimination, aiming at separating themselves from them. Thus, according to local authorities, the complications arising from the new socio-spatial configuration of municipalities, as well as the possible lack of infrastructures, result from the negligence of irresponsible housing developers, and, ultimately, of the consumers of their real estate products, who, from the respondents' standpoint, voluntarily decided to purchase their properties in a free market context.

A particularly interesting finding is identifying a new discourse perspective which allows some of the respondents to detect some unexpected positive effects of the economic crisis. Paradoxically, such *positive effects* are related to the crisis contributing to undo what had been done during the expansive period, when the actions of housing developers were supported –or even literally promoted– by the major political parties and local political leaders struggled to attract the largest possible number of North European residents to their respective towns. Thus, according to this perspective, the return of a significant part of foreign residents to their countries of origin, together with the retreat into the old urban centers of many of those still living in Spain, have encouraged new forms of interaction and participation. This trend is now regarded by politicians as positive, all the more so as such a withdrawal unburdens local authorities of the expensive cost of maintaining a heritage of extensive suburbs, which in the past symbolized a particular idea of progress but now stand for the inherent contradictions hidden in it.